

HEROIC WOMEN OF THE OLDEN DAY.

BY HENRY WILLIAM HERBERT.

EDITHA, THE SWAN-NECKED.

England was happy yet and free under her Saxon kings. The unhappy natives of the land, the Britons of old time, long ago driven back into their impregnable fastnesses among the Welsh mountains and the craggy and pathless wilds of Scotland, still rugged and hirsute with the yet uninvaded masses of the great Caledonian forest, had subsided into quiet and disturbed the lowland plains of fair England no longer; and so long as they were left free to enjoy their rude pleasures of the chase and of internal warfare, undisturbed, were content to be debarred from the rich pastures and fertile cornfields which had once owned their sway. The Danes and Norsemen, savage Jarls and Vilings of the North had ceased to prey on the coasts of Northumberland and Yorkshire; the seven kingdoms of the turbulent and tumultuous Heptarchy, ever distracted by domestic strife, had subsided into one realm, ruled under laws, regular and for the most part mild and equitable, by a single monarch, occupied by one homogeneous and kindred race, wealthy and prosperous according to the ideas of wealth and prosperity in those days, at peace at home and undisturbed from without; if not, indeed, very highly civilized, at least supplied with all the luxuries and comforts which the age knew or demanded—a happy, free, contented people, with a patriarchal aristocracy, and a king limited in his prerogatives by the rights of his people, and the privileges of the nobles as secured by law.

Such was England, when on the death of Hardicanute, Edward, afterward called the Confessor, ascended the throne by the powerful aid of Earl Godwin, and re-established the old Saxon dynasty on a base which seemed to promise both durability and peace.

Had this Edward been in any sense a man, it is probably that the crown of England would have continued in the Saxon line, that the realm of England would have remained in the hands of an unmixed race, and that the great dominant people—most falsely named by an absurd misnomer Anglo-Saxon, since with the slightest possible coloring of the ancient British blood, they are the offspring purely of an intermingling of Saxon and Norman blood, owing to the former their stubborn pertinacity of will, to the latter their fiery energy, their daring enterprise and quick intellect—would never have sprung into existence to hold the balance of power, if not the absoluteness of sway on each side of the ocean, and in the four quarters of the globe.

But he was not a man, only a monk—a miserable lay monk—a husband of Earl Godwin's lovely daughter, yet a fanatical celibatarian—not fit to be a king—not fit to be a man—not fit even to be a Saxon monk, when monks were men like Becket.

Jealous of his Saxon nobles, he had recourse to Norman favorites, and England was already

half a Norman province, and William of Normandy his favorite, until the counter jealousy of his nobles compelled him again to have recourse to Godwin, and his gallant sons, Harold, and Gurth, and Leofwin, who cleared the kingdom of the intrusive Norman courtiers, re-established the Saxon constitution, and nominally as the ministers and deputies of the weak king; but really, as his guardians and governors, ruled England happily, well and lawfully in his stead.

Godwin, meantime, had departed this life, full of years and honors. Edward, the nephew of Edward the Confessor, whom he had invited over from Hungary, and destined to be his successor, had departed also, leaving his son, Edgar Atheling, a minor, heir to his empty expectations and his noble blood. And now what little intellect there was and spirit in the monk-king awoke, and be perceived, with that singular clearness of perception which sometimes seems to visit men, dull before and obtuse of intellect, when they are dying, that his people now would willingly adopt the Norman for a ruler, or submit to the sway of William the Bastard, to whom he had in past days well nigh promised the succession of his kingdom.

Therefore, of late, Harold, the son of Godwin, the flower of the whole Saxon race, and, in fact, heir ruler, as the king's lieutenant and vicegerent, came to be looked upon by the whole Saxon population of the land, as their next Saxon king, in the to be hereafter. The jealousies which had disturbed the mind of Edward had long since passed away; and Harold, whom he once had looked upon almost with the eyes of popular aversion, he now regarded almost as his own son. Yet still the Saxon hostages, Ulfroth, the youngest son of Godwin, and Harold's brother, and the still younger son of Swega—who, in the time of his mad distrust of his own countrymen, his unnatural predilection for the Normans, had been delivered for safe keeping into the hands of William of Normandy—still lingered melancholy exiles, far from the white cliffs of their native land. And now, for the first time since their departure, did the aspect of affairs look propitious for their liberation; and Harold, brother of the one and uncle of the other, full of proud confidence in his own intellect and valor, applied to Edward for permission that he might cross the English channel, and, personally visiting the Norman, bring back the hostages in honor and security to the dear land of their forefathers. The countenance of the Confessor fell at the request, and conscious, probably, in his own heart of that rash promise made in days long past, and long repeated to the ambitious William, he manifested a degree of agitation amounting almost to alarm.

"Harold," he said, after a long pause of deliberation, "Harold, my son, since you have made me this request, and that your noble heart seems set on its accomplishment, it shall not be my part to do constraint or violence to your affectionate and patriotic wishes. Go, then, if such be your resolve, but go without my leave, and contrary to my advice. It is not that I would not have your brother and your kinsman home; but that I do distrust the means of their deliverance; and sure I am, that should you go in person, some terrible

disaster shall befall ourselves and this our country. Well do I know Duke William, well do I know his spirit, brave, crafty, daring, deep, ambitious and designing. You, too, he hates, especially, nor will he grant you anything save at a price that shall draw down an overwhelming ruin on you who shall pay it, and on the throne of which you are the glory and the stay. If we would have these hostages delivered at a less ransom than the downfall of our Saxon dynasty, the slavery of merry England, another messenger than thou must seek the wily Norman: be it, however, as thou wilt, my friend, my kinsman, and my son."

Oh! sage advice, and admirable counsel! advice how fatally neglected! counsel how sadly frustrated! Gallant and brave and young, fraught with a noble sense of his own powers, a full reliance on his own honorable purposes, untaught as yet in that hardest lesson of the world's hardest school, distrust of others, suspicion of all men, it is not wonderful that Harold thought lightly of the wisdom of the old in the self-sufficient confidence of youth.

Stranger it is, and sadder, that he thought lightly of the apprehensions, laughed at the doubts, and resisted the tears of one whom he had sworn to love dearer and better and more truly than any other living thing on earth, or in Heaven—whom, as yet, he did love as perfectly as any mortal man may love, who is ambitious—for what is ambition, but the most refined and sublimated of all selfishness? Editha, the swan-necked, the fairest, brightest, purest of the Saxon maidens of England,—Editha, playmate of his guileless and happy boyhood—betrothed of his promising and buoyant youth—mistress—alas! alas!—though under promise still of honorable wedlock—of his aspiring and ambitious manhood.

For she too had loved not wisely, but too well: she too had fallen not an ignoble nor unreluctant victim to man's cupidity, ambition, selfishness and treason—and sad penance did she too, almost lifelong, for that one fatal error, and by most cruel suffering win its absolution.

"Be sure," she said, severely weeping with her fond white arms about his muscular neck, and her luxuriant light brown tresses floating around them both, clasped in that lingering, last embrace, like a veil of orient sunlight; "be sure, Harold, that if you do go on this fatal journey—fatal at once to you, and me and England—we never shall meet more on earth, until we meet ne'er again to sever in the dark grave. Nevertheless, go you will, and go you must: therefore no tears, no prayers of mine shall thwart the purpose which they may not alter, nor shake the spirit which they may not turn from its set will. The weird that is spae'd to every man when he is born, he must dree it to the end. And my weird is to die for you, as it is yours to die—in vain! in vain!—for England. But it is not our weird ever to be, or here or elsewhere, man and wife. Go your way, therefore, go your way, and God's blessings go with you, and be about you; but you and I have met this time, to meet no more forever!"

They parted; and on the morrow Harold set

forth upon his journey, as if it were in pursuit of pleasure, surrounded by a blythe train of gay companions, gallantly mounted, gorgeously attired, with falcon upon fist and greyhound at heel—gaily and merrily he set forth on that serene autumnal morning, for the coast of Sussex. And on the morrow Editha set forth upon her journey, as if it were to the grave, surrounded by her weeping attendants, clad in the darkest weeds, with veiled faces, and crucifixes borne before them—sadly and forebodingly she set forth on that serene autumnal morning, for the sequestered cloisters of the nunnery of Croyland.

Nor had Harold tarried long in the princely court at Avranches, ere all the sad prognostications, alike of the aged monarch and the youthful lady, were made good: for having been induced first to promise in an unguarded hour to aid William in obtaining the possession of the English crown, that wily prince soon inveigled him into swearing to the due performance of that rash and unholly promise, on reliques the most sacred that could be collected, which were secretly concealed beneath the altar cloth, and displayed only when the unhallowed oath was plighted. The pledges on both sides were determined. Alice, the Norman's daughter, should be the Saxon's promised bride; Ultroth, the Saxon's brother, should remain the Norman's hostage until the crown of Edward should bind the brows of William.

So Harold set sail immediately for England, leaving the brother—for whose liberty he came a suitor—ten times more deeply forfeit than he had been before, and to find the woman whom he had so disloyally foresworn, the bride of heaven, sequestered in the nunnery of Croyland.

On his first interview with Edward, he related all that had occurred—even his own involuntary oath! and the old sovereign trembled and grew pale, but manifested nothing of surprise or anger. "I knew it," he replied, in calm but hollow tones. "I knew it, and I did forewarn you, how that your visit to the Norman should bring misery on you and ruin on your country! As I forewarned you, so has it come to pass. So shall it come to pass hereafter, till all hath been fulfilled. God only grant that I live not to see it."

Nor did he live to see it. But he did live to see Harold, once foresworn to Editha, foresworn again to Alice. For being sent to suppress a rebellion in the North, raised by Morcar and Edwin, Earls of Northumberland and grandsons of the great Duke Leofric, against his own brother Tostig, he openly took sides with the former, espousing their sister Adelgitha, and pronouncing against Tostig, who fled infuriate to his father-in-law, the Duke of Flanders, soon to raise war against his native land and its kindred usurper.

For worn out with anxiety and sorrow, the feeble monk-king passed away, and was gathered to his fathers, leaving an imbecile heir to his throne of right, in the helpless Edgar Atheling, and two fierce, capable, and mutually detested rivals, in Harold, the Saxon, and the Norman William.

Little time had Harold, who stepped as by right, and of course, into the vacant seat of royalty, to attend now to wife or friend; for scarcely

was he seated on the perilous throne, ere the same gale filled the sails of two royal armaments, both hastening to his own shores to dispute his ill-won greatness—one from the cold shores of Norway, bearing the fierce and envious Tostig, backed by Harold Hardrada, king of Norway, with all his wild sea-kings and terrible Berserkers, under the flag of Norseland—the other from the sunny coasts of Normandy and the fair Cotentin, filled with the mailed Norman chivalry, the men who never charged in vain, or couched lance but to conquer, under the banner consecrated by the pope against the perfidious and the traitor, led by the mighty bastard.

Still it is said that, false to Editha, false to Alice, he was again false to Adelgitha, and would have recalled his swan-necked beauty from the cold couch of vowed virginity, to the genial marriage bed, from the gray cloister to the gorgeous court, of which she should be the queen. But he met no response, save the most significant of all—silence.

The sinner had repented and become a saint. The weak girl had been ripened through the fire of anguish into the heroic woman.

How Tostig fared with his ally, Harold Hardrada, the gigantic, the bridge of Stamford witnessed; and the raven banner borne down the bloody streams of Derwent to the exulting Ouse, and the Saxon cry of victory! Hurrah for King Harold!

How William fared with his Norman chivalry, the downs of Hastings witnessed, and the heights, known to this day, of Battle, and the consecrated banner high in air, and the Norman cry of victory, “*Dex aide les gentils gens de Normandie.*” *

It was the morning after the exterminating fight of Hastings. The banner blessed of the Roman pontiff streamed on the tainted air, from the same hillock whence the Dragon standard of the Saxons had shone unconquered to the sun of yester even! Hard by was pitched the proud pavilion of the conqueror, who, after the tremendous strife and perilous labors of the preceding day, reposed himself in fearless and untroubled confidence upon the field of his renown; secure in the possession of the land which he was destined to transmit to his posterity, for many a hundred years, by the red title of the sword. To the defeated Saxons, morning, however, brought but a renewal of those miseries, which, having yesterday commenced with the first victory of their Norman lords, were never to conclude or even to relax, until the complete amalgamation of the rival races should leave no Normans to torment, no Saxons to endure; all being merged at last into one general name of English, and by their union giving origin to the most powerful, and brave, and intellectual people the world has ever looked upon since the extinction of Rome's freedom. At the time of which we are now speaking, nothing was thought of by the victors save how to rivet most securely on the necks of the unhappy natives, their yoke of iron—nothing by the poor subjugated Saxons, but how to escape for the moment the unrelenting massacre, which was urged, far and wide, by the remorseless conquerors throughout the devastated country,

With the defeat of Harold's host, all national hope of freedom was at once lost to England—though to a man the English population were brave and loyal, and devoted to their country's rights. The want of leaders—all having perished side by side, on that disastrous field—of combination, without which, myriads are but dust in the scale against the force of one united handful, rendered them quite unworthy of any serious fears, and even of consideration to the blood-thirsty barons of the invading army. Over the whole expanse of level country, which might be seen from the slight elevation whereon was pitched the camp of William, on every side might be described small parties of the Norman horse, driving in with their bloody lances as if they were mere cattle, the unhappy captives, a few of whom they now began to spare, not from the slightest sentiment of mercy, but literally that their arms were weary with the task of slaying, although their hearts were yet insatiate of blood. It must be taken now into consideration by those who listen with dismay, and wonder to the accounts of pitiless barbarity, of ruthless, indiscriminating slaughter on the part of men, whom they have hitherto been taught to look upon as brave, indeed, as lions in the field, but not partaking of the lion's nature after the field was won—not only that the seeds of enmity had long been sown between those rival people, but that the deadly crop of hatred had grown up, watered abundantly by tears and blood of either; and lastly, that the fierce fanaticism of religious persecution was added to the natural rancor of a war waged for the ends of conquest or extermination. The Saxon nation, from the king, downward, to the meanest serf, who fought beneath his banner, or buckled on the arms of liberty, were all involved under the common bar of the pope's interdict!—they were accursed of God, and handed over by His holy church, to the kind mercies of the secular arm! and, therefore, though but yesterday they were a powerful and united nation, to-day, they were but a vile horde of scattered outlaws, whom any man might slay wherever he should find them, whether in arms or otherwise,—amenable for blood neither to any mortal jurisdiction, nor even to the ultimate tribunal to which all must submit hereafter, unless deprived of their appeal, like these poor fugitives, by excommunication from the pale of Christianity. For thirty miles around the Norman camp, pillars of smoke by day, continually streaming upward to the polluted heaven, and the red glare of nightly conflagration, told fatally the doom of many a happy home! Neither the castle nor the cottage might preserve their male inhabitants from the sword's edge, their females from more barbarous persecution! Neither the sacred hearth of hospitality, nor the more sacred altars of God's churches, might protect the miserable fugitives—neither the mail-shirt of the man-at-arms, nor the monk's frock of serge availed against the thrust of such as the land, wherein those horrors were enacted, has never witnessed since, through many a following age.

High noon approached, and in the conqueror's tent a gorgeous feast was spread—the red wine flowed profusely, and song and minstrelsy arose with their heart-soothing tones, to which the feeble

groans of dying wretches bore a dread burthen from the plain whereon they still lay struggling in their great agonies, too sorely maimed to live, too strong as yet to die. But, ever and anon, their wail waxed feebler and less frequent; for many a plunderer was on foot, licensed to ply his odious calling in the full light of day; reaping his first, if not his richest booty, from the dead bodies of their slaughtered foemen. Ill fared the wretches who lay there, un tended by the hand of love or mercy—"scorched by the death thirst, and writhing in vain"—but worse fared they who showed a sign of life, to the relentless robbers of the dead—for then the dagger, falsely called that of mercy, was the dispenser of immediate immortality. The conqueror sat at his triumphant board, and barons drank his health—"First English monarch, of the pure blood of monarchy!" "King by the right of the sword's edge." "Great, glorious, and sublime!"—yet was not his heart softened, nor was his bitter hate toward the unhappy prince, who had so often ridden by his side in war, and feasted at the same board with him in peace, relinquished or abated. Even while the feast was at the highest, while every heart was jocund and sublime, a trembling messenger approached, craving, on bended knee, permission to address the conqueror and king—for so he was already schooled by brief, but hard experience, to style the devastator of his country.

"Speak out, dog Saxon," cried the ferocious prince; "but since thou must speak, see that thy speech be brief, and thou wouldst keep thy tongue uncropped thereafter!"

"Great Duke, and mighty," replied the trembling envoy, "I bear you greeting from Elgitha, herewhile the noble wife of Godwin, the queenly mother of our late monarch—now, as she bade me style her, the humblest of your supplicants and slaves. Of your great nobleness and mercy, mighty King, she suez you, that you will grant her the poor leave to search amid the heaps of those our Saxon dead, that her three sons may at least lie in consecrated earth. So may God send you peace and glory here, and everlasting happiness hereafter!"

"Hear to the Saxon slave!" William exclaimed, turning as if in wonder toward his nobles, "hear to the Saxon slave, that dares to speak of consecrated earth, and of interment for the accursed body of that most perfidious, excommunicated liar! Hence! tell the mother of the dead dog, whom you have dared to style your King, that for the interdicted and accursed dead, the sands of the sea-shore are but too good a sepulchre!"

"She bade me proffer, humbly, to your acceptance, the weight of Harold's body in pure gold," faintly gasped forth the terrified and cringing messenger, "so you would grant her that permission."

"Proffer us gold!—what gold? or whose? Know, villain, all the gold throughout this conquered realm is ours. Hence, dog and outcast, hence! nor presume e'er again to come, insulting us by proffering, as a boon to our acceptance, that which we own already, by the most indefeasible and ancient right of conquest! Said I not well, knights, vavasours, and nobles?"

"Well! well! and nobly," answered they, one

and all. "The land is ours—and all therein is—their dwellings, their demesnes, their wealth, whether of gold or silver, or of cattle—yea! they themselves are ours! themselves, their sons, their daughters and their wives—our portion and inheritance, to be our slaves for ever!"

"Begone! you have our answer," exclaimed the Duke, spurning him with his foot, "and hark ye, arbalastmen and archers, if any Saxon more approach us on like errand, see if his coat of skin be proof against the quarrel of the shaft!"

And once again the feast went on, and louder rang the revelry, and faster flew the wine-cup round the tumultuous board! All day the banquet lasted, even till the dews of heaven fell on that fatal field, watered sufficiently, already, by the rich gore of many a noble heart. All day the banquet lasted, and far was it prolonged into the watches of the night, when, rising with the wine-cup in his hand, "Nobles and barons," cried the Duke, "friends, comrades, conquerors—bear witness to my vow! Here, on these heights of Hastings, and more especially upon yon mound and hillock, where (God gave to us our high victory, and where our last foe fell)—there will I raise an abbey to His eternal praise and glory; richly endowed it shall be from the first fruits of this our land. Battle, it shall be called, to send the memory of this, the great and singular achievement of our race to far posterity—and, by the splendor of our God, wine shall be plentier among the monks of Battle, than water in the noblest and the richest cloister else, scarce the world o'er! This do I swear, so may God aid, who hath thus far assisted us for our renown, and will not now deny His help, when it be asked for His own glory!"

The second day dawned on the place of horror, and not a Saxon had presumed, since the intol erant message of the Duke, to come to look upon his dead! But now the ground was needed, wheron to lay the first stone of the abbey William had vowed to God. The ground was needed; and, moreover, the foul steam from the human shambles was pestilential on the winds of heaven—and now, by trumpet sound and proclamation through the land, the Saxons were called forth, on pain of death, to come and seek their dead, lest the health of the conquerors should suffer from the pollution they themselves had wrought. Scarce had the blast sounded, and the glad tidings been announced, once only, ere from their miserable shelters—where they had herded with the wild beasts of the forest, from wood, morass and cavern, happy if there they might escape the Norman spear—forth crept the relics of that persecuted race. Old men and matrons, with hoary heads, and steps that tottered no less from the effect of terror than of age—maiden and youths, and infants, too happy to obtain permission to search amid those festering heaps, dabbling their hands in the corrupt and pestilential gore which filled each nook and hollow of the dinted soil, so they might bear away, and water with their tears, and yield to consecrated ground, the relics of those brave ones once loved so fondly, and now so bitterly lamented. It was toward the afternoon of that same day, when a long train was seen approaching, with crucifix, and cross, and censer, the monks of Waltham abbey, coming

to offer homage for themselves, and for their tenantry and vassals, to him whom they acknowledged as their king—expressing their submission to the high will of the Norman pontiff, justified, as they said and proved, by the assertion of God's judgment upon the hill of Hastings.

Highly delighted by this absolute submission, the first he had received from any English tongue, the conqueror received the monks with courtesy and favor, granting them high immunities, and promising them free protection and the unquestioned tenure of their broad demesnes for ever. Nay, after he had answered their address, he detained two of their number, men of intelligence, as, with his wonted quickness of perception, he instantly discovered, from whom to derive information as to the nature of his new-acquired country and newly conquered subjects.

Osgad and Ailric, the deputed messengers from the respected principal of their community, had yet a farther and higher object than to tender their submission to the conqueror. Their orders were, at all and every risk, to gain permission to consign the corpse of their late king and founder to the earth, previously denied to him. But they, for all his courtesy to them, and kindness, churchmen although they were, dared not so much as to mention the forbidden name of their unhappy king—nor was there any hope that any tomb should receive the mangled relics of the last Saxon King of England, although the corpses of his brothers, Leofwin and Gurth, had been found on the hillock whereon the last Saxon blow was stricken, whereon the last Saxon banner floated—found recognized, though sorely mangled, and consigned to the grave with rites of sepulchre so freely granted as might have proved to those craven priests, that the wrath of the conqueror was at end, and that the valiant though fierce Norman was not one to wage war, after the first burst of wrath had blown over, on the gallant dead.

Tidings at length reached Editha, Editha, the swan-necked, who, deserted and dishonored when he she loved had a throne in prospect, had not ceased from her true-hearted adoration, but in her joyless home still shared her heart in silence between her memories and her God.

Her envy won the conqueror's ear, and it is avouched that a tear dimmed his unblenching eye, when he heard her sad tale, received her humble prayer. He swore a great oath as he started from his regal throne, "By the splendor of God's eyes!" he swore, "a true woman! worthy to be the mother of men!" So her request was granted, and to their wonder and delight, Osgad and Ailric heard the mandate that they should seek for, and entomb the poor and fallen clay that so late boasted itself king.

Throughout the whole of the third day succeeding that unparalleled defeat, those old men toiled among the naked corpses, gory and grim, maimed and disfigured, festering in the sun, weltering in the night dews, infecting the wholesome airs of heaven with a reek, as from the charnel-house—toiled, if they might find the object of their veneration. But vain were all their toils—vain all their searchings, even when they called in the aid of his most intimate attendants, ay! of the mother that bore him. Leofwin and Gurth had

been recognized with ease, but not one eye, even of those who had most dearly loved him could now distinguish the mutilated features of the king.

But if there was no eye at Hastings, there was a heart at Croyland that could not be deceived, even by the corruption and the worm. Forth from her nunnery in Croyland, whence she had never thought to move again, save to her long last home, Editha, the swan-necked, came. Nine days had elapsed ere she should reach the fatal spot, and the appalling horrors of the search, the awful extent of the pollution, denied the smallest hope of his discovery. Yet she still expressed her full and confident conviction that she could recognize that loved one, so long as but one hair remained upon that head she had once so dearly cherished.

It was night when she arrived on the fatal field, and by the light of torches once more they set out on their awful duty.

"Lead me," she said, "Lead me to the spot where the last blow was stricken, where the last warrior fell."

And they led to the knoll where Leofwin and Gurth had been discovered. It was a hideous pile of pestilential carnage, horses and men, Normans and Saxons, piled on each other, twenty deep, around a shattered pole, which had been once the staff of the Saxon's royal banner.

She sprang down from her palfrey, unassisted, and with an instinct that nothing could deceive went straight to the corpse of Harold. It had been turned already to and fro, many times, by those who sought it. His mother had looked on it, and pronounced it not her son's, but that devoted heart knew it at once, and broke! Whom rank and wealth and honors had divided, defeat, ruin and death made one! and the same grave contained the cold remains of the swan-necked Editha, and the last scion of the Saxon kings of England.

Was not she, then, frail sinner as she was, one not the least heroic of the heroic women of the olden days, and with the truest woman's truest heroism!